

# INTRODUCTION

## Expert searching

The death in June 2001 of Ellen Roche, a technician at Johns Hopkins Asthma and Allergy Center and healthy volunteer in an asthma study, had a significant impact on the medical research community far beyond the campus of Johns Hopkins University [1]. The role of literature searching as part of the development of research protocols and the subsequent internal review board reviews of these protocols became an important nationwide news story almost immediately. According to the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP), published literature about the toxic effects of inhaling hexamethonium was readily available and should have been taken into account by the principal investigator, who decided to allow Roche to inhale the chemical that was responsible for causing her death.

News of this fatal incident created an immediate discussion among health sciences librarians around the world. Many are convinced that the inclusion of an expert searcher in the development of the research protocol at Johns Hopkins would have brought the appropriate literature to the attention of the investigators on this asthma study and may have prevented the death of the research subject.

### MEDICAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION TASK FORCE APPOINTED

As a result of the attention drawn to this topic, the MLA Board of Directors decided at their September 2001 meeting to appoint the Task Force on Expert Searching to recommend actions that would promote the importance of expert searching in health care and biomedical research and to develop and implement a plan for achieving them. This special symposium on expert searching is one of those actions.

### CONTENT OF SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM

This special symposium pulls together a series of papers on expert searching and the education and practice of expert searchers. It begins with the Medical Library Association's policy statement, "The Role of Expert Searching in Health Sciences Libraries," which outlines the knowledge and skills required to be an expert searcher and describes a number of high-impact situations in the health arena that require "rigorous examination of the published evidence prior to decision making." The policy statement is followed by an article by Holst and Funk that reports the results of a survey used to gather background about the current state of expert searching in member libraries and describes some of the other actions taken by the Task Force on Expert Searching.

A general invitation to submit papers on the subject of expert searching in late 2003 resulted in eight other papers being included in the symposium. The first three papers address the education of librarians to become and remain competent literature searchers.

Smith takes a historical look at how online medical literature searching has evolved since the earliest days of MEDLINE availability, while Nicholson examines the way search education is woven into the curricula of the top library and information science schools in the United States. Vieira and Dunn describe the on-the-job peer training used by librarians at New York University Medical Center to maintain their searching expertise.

The next three papers are written from the perspective of librarians who are involved in preparing systematic reviews of the literature. While the content of these three papers has significant overlap, as a group, they provide a fairly comprehensive picture of the key role played by library professionals in the systematic review process. McGowan and Sampson address the role of the librarian members of the systematic review teams of the Institute of Population Health at the Ottawa Health Research Institute. Harris outlines the step-by-step process used to assure that literature search strategies and results are a comprehensive and accurate component of the systematic review process at the Veterans Evidence-Based Research Dissemination Implementation Center (VERDICT) in San Antonio, Texas. Ward, Meadows, and Nashelsky describe the Family Physicians' Inquiries Network (FPIN) and the evolution of librarians' involvement as coauthors for the Clinical Inquiries published in two major family practice publications.

Two additional papers address expert searching for specific groups of health professionals. Alpi explains how literature searching in the field of public health differs from searching in other health care fields. Lavin and her colleagues provide an interesting perspective on how evidence-based practice in nursing differs from evidence-based medicine and their unique solution to the problem of constructing search filters that work with the types of evidence found in nursing literature.

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### REFERENCE

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